



Farm Rescue's Samaritan Mission

Group plants and harvests for farm families in times of great need.

When Staci Klemetson generously consented to allow Farm Rescue to include her family in the organization's publicity, no one expected she would have a seizure later that day, be taken to the hospital, and pass away 10 days later.

"They are pretty awesome," she said cheerfully as she folded clothes in her tidy farm home. Outside, Farm Rescue volunteers combined the Klemetsons' soybeans on their Ulen, Minnesota, farm. "I know they (Farm Rescue) took a big weight off Matthew's shoulders when they said they were going to help."

That weight that came off Matt's shoulders was the concern about harvesting his crop when he had higher priorities — caring for his five children and wife of 17 years. Staci had been diagnosed with cancer the year before. She and Matt wanted to share their story so that Farm Rescue could help other farm families.

"Matt's been to every treatment," Staci

said. "He's my medicine man. He's a farmer, nurse, doctor — he does it all. I'd be lost without him."

Prioritizing family is exactly why Bill Gross organized Farm Rescue in 2005. When families deal with long-term illness, serious injuries, or a natural disaster, volunteers and sponsors step in to plant or harvest crops. Usually it's enough to get the family through a tough time. Sometimes it saves the farm.

FARM RESCUE IS BORN

As a UPS Boeing 747 captain based in Anchorage, Alaska, Gross lives an international lifestyle, flying to places like Hong Kong and Germany. When not working, he often travels to other countries on mission trips.

Part of his spirit lingered on the Cleveland, North Dakota, farm where he grew up. In the turbulent 1980s, farming was never a career option, but Gross hoped that when he retired he could help other farmers. It turns out he couldn't wait. At 38, he had an epiphany.

left: The Klemetson kids gather with their father and Bill Gross in front of the Farm Rescue semi. From left to right (back) are Alayna, 14; Noah, 12; Caleb, 3; Matt; Bill Gross; (front) Adison, 9; and Isabel, 6. right: Staci Klemetson on one of her last days on the farm.

"Farm Rescue came about when I was driving one day," Gross explains. "It all flashed before my eyes that this would be my mission field, in the fields of farm families helping them during their time of need."

He envisioned being a lone good Samaritan stopping at farms that needed help. He'd buy a tractor and plant crops.

Now, looking back, Gross admits he can't believe how big his idea has grown. In seven years, Farm Rescue has enlisted 1,000 volunteers and dozens of sponsors, helping more than 200 families in the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota, and Iowa.

In each case, the families are dealing with a serious misfortune. By missing planting or harvesting, they would add debt and possibly lose their farms. ➤



Farm Rescue volunteers are eager to help the Klemetsons with harvest.

Gross agrees that neighbors should be the ones to help each other, but Farm Rescue plays an important role. The time to plant and harvest is short, and neighbors have their own work to do.

Matt Klemetson understands that, too. He worked in quality assurance for a bank software company until 2009. In order to be home with his family and avoid long commutes, he made the transition to farming by working for a neighbor before starting on his own in 2011.

In May 2011, Staci, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with lung, brain, and bone cancer. With aggressive treatment, things were looking up by the end of the year. But the cancer returned in early 2012, and she spent eight weeks off and on in the hospital.

When it came time to plant, Matt knew that family and neighbors would help as they had before. But when a neighbor told him about Farm Rescue, Matt contacted the organization.

“With the weather and not knowing what’s coming tomorrow, it’s a lot to ask of neighbors to come and do someone else’s work before they do their own,” Matt says. “What they (Farm Rescue volunteers) did in a day and a half would have taken me four or five days. With

Staci in the hospital, the biggest problem I had was getting everything ready. That takes a lot longer than people realize.”

“Farm Rescue, as a nonprofit organization, has all these good-hearted volunteers who want to help,” Gross adds. “Maybe we plant and the neighbors harvest. We’re just filling the gap and helping families during their time of crisis.”

He emphasizes that Farm Rescue does not give any handouts or cash. Farmers provide the seed and fuel. Volunteers plant or harvest with sponsor-donated equipment. Generally, Farm Rescue volunteers only plant, or harvest, but not both. However, for the Klemetsons they did both because of the family’s situation. The faith-filled family considered it an answer to prayer.

DEVOTED VOLUNTEERS

Besides the satisfaction of planting and harvesting, Gross and Farm Rescue volunteers say that meeting families, such as the Klemetsons, gives them an emotional sense of purpose.

Charlie Bartsch, a retired crop farmer, admits it’s a learning experience working with computers and auto steer on Farm Rescue equipment. But he enjoys farming with new machines and traveling around to help farm families. Since he learned about Farm Rescue five years ago, he’s been one of Gross’s key volunteers.

“It makes you feel good to be here,” he says as the combine’s 35-foot header rolls and fills the hopper with soybeans.

Outside of his time working, Bartsch gets to know the families and bonds with some of them – like Caleb, the Klemetsons’ youngest child. The 3-year-old has been talking about Charlie since he met him the day before, and Caleb is eagerly waiting his turn to ride in the big green combine.

Bartsch chokes up a bit describing some of the most tragic cases. He empathizes. Bartsch and his wife lost a son at 40 to esophageal cancer. The work of Farm Rescue is good, Bartsch says. He is grateful his wife is supportive when he is gone from home for two to seven days at a time devoting himself to the work.

SAVING FAMILY FARMS

Gross hopes that Farm Rescue’s work continues as long as it’s needed. “There’s a tangible part and an intangible part of Farm Rescue,” Gross says. “The tangible part is what you see out here with us helping a family. The intangible part is making it more likely for future generations to continue farming. And that’s good for all of rural America.”

That is the ultimate goal, to save family farms for future generations — like little Caleb and his siblings. •

Get Involved

For help: Families in North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota, and Iowa can fill out an application form on the website or call for more information. (Unfortunately, due to IRS regulations, Farm Rescue can’t help when a farmer dies.)

To volunteer: Download a volunteer form from the website. Besides farming, people with other skills, including office work, graphic arts, and organization, are needed.

To donate: Individuals and business sponsors should contact the Farm Rescue office. Donations are tax deductible.

Contact: 701/252-2017 or www.farmrescue.org •